
BIG OPPORTUNITIES FOR SMALL COMMUNITIES

MISSOURI HAS THE TOOLS FOR SUCCESS

by Mike Downing

One of Missouri's greatest strengths is its highly-skilled workforce. From excavators and miners to healthcare workers and computer technicians, Missouri can support any industry. However, only recently, has Missouri gained the tools to validate its workforce and promote it to prospective and current businesses.

CERTIFIED WORK READY COMMUNITIES

Missouri currently has four Certified Work Ready Communities, by far the most in the nation, as well as the designation of having the nation's first, Certified Work Ready Community in Jasper County. The Certified Work Ready Communities initiative was launched by the Missouri Division of Workforce Development in September 2012 when Missouri was chosen as one of only a handful of states to pilot the program. This initiative uses the ACT's (American College Testing) National Career Readiness Certificate for a skill assessment on a county-by-county basis to help communities qualify their available workforce, and build a **talent pipeline** ready to serve existing employers and attract new business. The effort is a voluntary initiative within a community that gauges county certification by measuring the number of National Career Readiness Certificate (NCRC) holders within the county, as well as the number of employer partnerships.

The NCRC is a portable, industry-recognized credential that clearly identifies and certifies three essential skills - reading for information, applied math and locating information. These three specific skills are estimated to be required for 85 percent of jobs. The certificates, as well as the skills they verify, help assure prospective and current employers that the individuals hired and/or advanced will succeed in their jobs. The NCRC is similar to a passport - regardless of where an individual lives or moves, the certificate testifies to his or her work-readiness. To date, the certificates are proven to accurately predict work readiness

and job performance, proving that Missouri workers are ready, willing and extremely capable of providing and sustaining a solid, strong workforce with **high productivity rates** and **low employee turnover**.

In 2012, Missouri was one of the first four states in the nation to qualify for the ACT CWRC Academy. Since its inception, the program has grown both statewide and nationally with 17 states currently participating. In March 2013, Jasper County achieved a huge feat when it became the first fully-certified Work Ready Community in the United States, less than two years after its largest city, Joplin, was struck by an E-F5 multiple-vortex tornado that affected 500 businesses and 4,000 workers. By utilizing the CWRC, the county was not only able to rebound from this disaster, but also exemplified how this innovative program could be successfully employed to strengthen and grow Missouri's workforce.

Since then, an additional three counties have achieved certified status, giving Missouri the distinction of having four out of the first five counties in the nation to receive this designation. (The only other county to achieve this distinction is Clarendon County in South Carolina.) In January 2014, the counties of Franklin, Ripley and Butler were certified as Work Ready Communities. With this certification, these counties are now better able to align workforce training programs with the economic development needs of their communities, match appropriate applicants to jobs based on skill level, and strengthen businesses by strengthening the workforce.

In addition to Missouri's four fully-certified counties, there are currently another 35 counties also working towards the certification. These counties are on track to become fully certified within two years and are **narrowing the skills gap** in their communities.

Through participation in the CWRC program, prospective companies are able to immediately gauge the quality of the workforce in a given area.

Because a qualified workforce is one of the first factors that many businesses consider when undergoing site selection, Missouri's high participation in the CWRC program is propelling prospective businesses to look at Missouri as the place to be for **accelerated growth**.

COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT BLOCK GRANTS

Another important factor that growing companies take into consideration when choosing a new place to locate, is the strength of the area's infrastructure. If an area has poor water systems, roadways or under-supported utilities, the cost to do business can be high. Thanks to the Community Development Block Grants (CDBG) program, the state of Missouri is able to offer grants to small communities to improve local facilities, address critical health and safety concerns, and develop a greater capacity for growth. The grants that are only available to towns with a population less than 50,000 or counties with a population under 200,000, can be used to fund projects ranging from housing and street repairs to industrial loans and job training. These improvements speak volumes to expanding businesses.

In the month of October 2013, the state of Missouri authorized more than \$4 million in CDBG funding to communities all across the state. Through the use of these funds, small communities such as Holliday, Edgar Springs, Jamestown and Risco are now able to offer upgraded infrastructure and facilities to businesses engaged in the site selection process. □

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